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# **China's Minority Nationality Problems**

IRR No. 182 - August 29, 1988



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**(U) China's Minority Nationality Problems**

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No. 182  
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**(C) Key Judgments**

Recent ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang underscores the sensitivity of relations between the Han (Chinese) majority and the large number of minority nationalities that populate six-tenths of China's land area. Violent clashes between Han and minority populations are nothing new, nor is friction between the central government in Beijing and local officials in minority-inhabited areas over how best to handle these sensitive relations.

Han-minority relations reached their nadir in China during the Cultural Revolution when Red Guards and leftist officials systematically destroyed vestiges of minority culture and religion and attempted to enforce a uniformity of language, dress, and culture. An influx of Han Chinese into many minority areas was intended to speed the process of Sinicization and assimilation.

Since Deng Xiaoping's return to power in the late 1970s, Beijing has implemented a policy of liberalization in minority relations which permits a greater degree of self-government, encourages promotion of ethnic minority officials, allows wider scope for cultivation of local languages and customs, and fosters development based on local economic traditions and regional natural advantages. Moreover, most ethnic minorities

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## Major Ethnic Minorities in China

U. S. S. R.

MONGOLIA

U. S. S. R.

Chinese  
line of  
control

NEPAL

INDIA

Vietnam  
Laos  
Burma  
Thailand

Taiwan

Philippines

South  
China  
Sea

Yellow  
Sea

East  
China  
Sea

Okinawa  
Hawaii  
Alaska

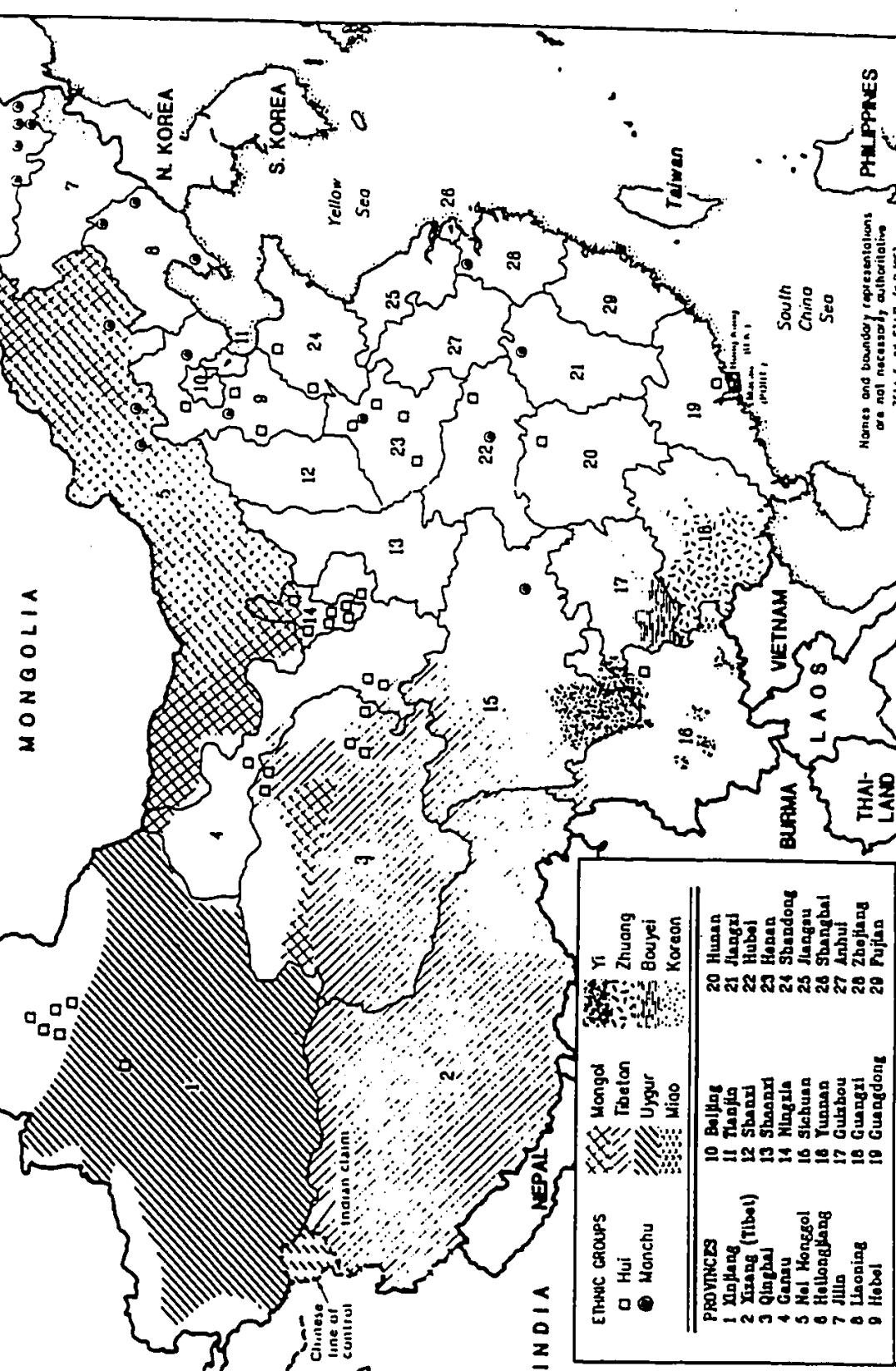
Hong Kong  
Macau

Guam  
Micronesia

Philippines

Names and boundary representations  
are not necessarily authoritative

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are exempted from stringent enforcement of such unpopular policies as the one-child-per-couple family planning regulation.

Past policies, although destructive of ethnic minority cultures, also brought some benefits in the form of jobs, training, and local economic development. Current policies, although more "liberal," also entail costs for ethnic minorities and the regions they inhabit. In particular, the strong emphasis on coastal development threatens to freeze out many minority areas in interior China from fully enjoying the benefits of industrial and agricultural growth and rising living standards. Some top officials of hinterland provinces--including several who are members of ethnic minorities--have publicly voiced their concern over the impact of the coastal development strategy.

China's minority nationality problems are not regime threatening, but they will require leadership sensitivity, a combination of flexibility and firmness, and an awareness in Beijing of the international and human rights dimensions of minority issues. Tibet is likely to remain China's most delicate challenge in minority relations for a variety of reasons--e.g., the legacy of history, the existence of a claimant to a rival government, international interest in the region, and the great prestige of the Dalai Lama. But other ethnic groups are likely to become increasingly assertive--if less violent--in pursuing their interests and seeking to expand the boundaries of China's more liberal minority policy.

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### Introduction

(C) The interaction between Beijing and China's ethnic minorities is replete with contradictions. In absolute terms, China's minorities outnumber the populations of all but nine countries in the world; in relative terms, they constitute only 8 percent of China's population (see appended table). They inhabit an area larger than all but six countries in the world, yet they are geographically, economically, technologically, and culturally marginal to the People's Republic.

(C) Nevertheless, the strategic importance of the minority-inhabited areas--almost exclusively along China's land borders, the existence in these areas of vast natural resources, and the relative underpopulation of the areas historically have given minority affairs an importance to Beijing out of proportion to mere numbers.

(LOU) The interaction of nationalities with central government policy is correspondingly complex. Since 1949, policy shifts in Beijing have had dramatic implications for the treatment of ethnic minorities, with each new set of policies giving rise to new sets of problems. Efforts at assimilation, which reached their high point during the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-69), led to armed uprisings and bloodshed.

### (C) Historical Background

Chinese regimes historically have paid great attention to relations with peripheral ethnic populations. Until the early 1800s, China's main security threat came from "barbarian" tribes to the north and west, a fact symbolized by the existence of the Great Wall. As recently as the 1930s, China faced the threat of dismemberment as local satraps under Moscow's influence sought to detach Xinjiang from Chinese control and the Japanese set up a puppet state in Manchuria. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Beijing had to contend with armed uprisings by ethnic populations along the borders which were supported by or conducted from the territories of neighboring powers, including India and the Soviet Union.

Recent violent unrest in Tibet, although qualitatively different than other post-Cultural Revolution ethnic disturbances in the PRC, is not unique. Armed clashes between the

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People's Liberation Army and minorities in Xinjiang took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and Beijing's control remains less than absolute in sections of China's far southwest bordering on Burma, Laos, and Thailand. Demonstrations break out periodically in various minority areas, usually linked to friction between ethnic minorities and Han settlers.

Extent of the Problem

(U) Beijing recognizes 56 minority nationalities, although experts claim to have identified as many as 400 distinct racial, linguistic, or cultural groups in the PRC. Together, the 56 recognized minorities number almost 86 million people and occupy about 0.5 million square kilometers, or about 60 percent of the country's land area. There are more Mongols in China than in Mongolia, more Muslims (see case study, p. 8) than in Saudi Arabia.

(C) These raw figures, however, tend to both overstate and understate the importance to the régime of Han-minority relations. Of the 14 ethnic groups that number more than 1 million--and account for 90 percent of all ethnic minorities in China--at least four groups have become almost entirely assimilated into the Han majority: the Zhuang (16 million); Hui, or Chinese Muslims (7.6 million); Manchu (9 million); and Koreans (1.3 million). The four groups represent up to 40 percent of all "minorities." Only a handful of ethnic groups--mainly Tibetans, Uygurs, Kazaks, and Mongols--present a potential security problem for Beijing.

(LOU) At the same time, some 134 of the 143 counties along China's 21,000-kilometer land border are predominantly inhabited by minorities; and about 20 ethnic groups straddle international borders, including Mongols on both sides of the PRC-Mongolia border and several nomadic groups along the Sino-Soviet border. As events of the past six months have shown, the activities of such relatively small groups as the Tibetans (more than 4 million, nationwide, of whom about half live in the Tibet Autonomous Region) can complicate China's foreign relations and inject sometimes-divisive controversy into domestic politics.

Nature of the Problem

(LOU) In an important sense, there is no such thing as an a priori Chinese "minority problem"; problems arise only when central policies collide with the national aspirations, culture, or traditions of ethnic groups. Put another way, each régime makes its own minority problems through the interaction of its policies with national minorities. Seen in this context, China's minority problems are potentially no less troublesome--

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albeit qualitatively different, and perhaps less violent--than in the past.

(C) Under Deng, Beijing has abandoned the overt efforts at assimilating ethnic minorities which prevailed from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s. These policies reached their height during the Cultural Revolution when Red Guards ransacked minority areas, destroyed cultural artifacts, and attempted to enforce uniform use of Han language, dress, and customs. During the first three decades of the People's Republic of China, large numbers of ethnic Chinese were encouraged to settle in minority areas. Many, including students "sent down" from school and prisoners undergoing labor reform, were banished to remote minority-inhabited areas, and thousands of demobilized soldiers were settled permanently along the border in quasi-military state farms. The influx of Hans strained limited resources, and the resultant confrontation of cultures sometimes led to violence.

(C) While destructive of traditional culture, central policy during this period involved benefits for some minority groups. The large military presence along the Sino-Soviet border produced employment, training opportunities, and economic development. Roads, rail lines, military factories, oilfields, and state farms were built, contributing to unprecedented economic modernization in many minority areas. Han colonizers brought with them education, medical care, modern communications, and other amenities. Some ethnic leaders, however, saw these signs of "progress" as portending the Sinicization of minorities and the disappearance of their traditional ways of life.

#### Impact of Deng's Reforms

(LOU) Deng Xiaoping's reforms and "open door" have resulted in a significant liberalization in minority policy. Almost all minorities, for example, are exempt from stringent enforcement of the one-child-per-couple birth control regulation that applies to Han Chinese; minority population growth rates have been roughly double the rate for Hans during this decade. Current policy permits free expression of cultural and religious identity and encourages limited development of education and literature in native languages.

(C) But current policy also has costs for minorities. Beijing's emphasis on coastal development has led to increasing discrepancies in incomes and standards of living between east coast, metropolitan China and the minority-inhabited hinterland. Entrepreneurial Hans, especially those with connections in east China, apparently have moved quickly to seize many of the economic opportunities opened up by the reforms in the interior,

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and Chinese media complain that interior provinces are often taken advantage of by sharp operators from the coast. Greater foreign trade and investment autonomy for coastal provinces--especially the new emphasis on importing raw materials for export processing--threaten to accelerate the development of a "dual economy" in China.

(C) Decentralization of decisionmaking authority and substantial erosion of Beijing's control over investment funding mean that the central government is no longer as capable of redistributing resources from the wealthier eastern regions to poorer areas in western China--including predominantly minority areas. Nor can it as rapidly implement plans for the construction of such needed infrastructure projects as the completion of the Xinjiang railway connection to the Soviet Union and the expansion of road networks. Similarly, Beijing is less able to assure investment in schools, hospitals, and cultural facilities. Over the last several years, school attendance rates, rates of medical coverage, and other past indicators of the benefits of the socialist system have been declining. While these problems are by no means unique to minorities--all of China's poorer areas are facing them--they tend to fall hardest on China's minority nationalities.

(LOU) Minority representatives have been quick to point out some of the costs of current central policy. The chairman of Tibet's government lashed out at central authorities during a late-March session of the National People's Congress, complaining that the government "has failed to consider the special conditions of areas inhabited mainly by people of minority nationalities.... These areas are no match for the economically developed provinces because of poor natural conditions and backward economies. It is unfair to let them compete with each other by the same rules." Other minority representatives to the NPC voiced similar complaints.

(C) At the same time, liberalization has led to demands for greater autonomy. In the words of Ulanhu--a Mongol, former PRC vice president, and longtime Communist Party member--"some state organs of higher levels still have not given sufficient autonomy" to minority nationalities and "don't want to give up certain decisionmaking powers" that should belong to minorities. Ismail Amat, chairman of the State Nationality Affairs Commission and a Uygur, pointed to the reason:

Some vestiges in the form of lack of mutual understanding between nationalities left behind from history cannot be wiped away quickly. In addition, because legal education for, and a constant deep-going policy toward, the minority nationalities are lacking, incidents of violating the nationalities policy...have often occurred.

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Ismail Amat was removed as governor of Xinjiang in 1986, reportedly for trying to limit Han immigration and stem the outward flow of regional resources.

(C) Prospects

China's current leadership appears intent on maintaining and expanding its more liberal minority nationalities policy and its generally more relaxed domestic political and cultural policy. At the same time, the leadership has pledged its commitment to take advantage of favorable international opportunities for the development of coastal China. Pledges that this development strategy will "trickle in" to the interior have been met with skepticism by academics and criticism from some political leaders in the hinterlands.

The intersection of these two sets of policies--liberalization and coastal development--will significantly affect the interaction of minorities with the central government for at least the next several years. Resulting political conflicts--aside from the unique case of Tibet (see case study, p. 9)--probably will not lead to violent demands for independence, but periodic disturbances and protests are likely. Indicative may be the June 1988 demonstration in Urumqi, Xinjiang; reportedly sparked by a decision to discontinue the teaching of college social science classes in Uygur, thereby forcing all students to study in Chinese.

Minorities more likely will increasingly take advantage of greater political freedom to press for better representation and engage in bureaucratic and interest-group politics. The course of events surrounding the official announcement earlier this year of China's new coastal development initiative may be suggestive of the nature of such future political conflict. In early 1988, General Secretary Zhao Ziyang returned to Beijing from an extensive year-end tour of coastal provinces, trumpeting the benefits of a single-minded effort to develop the coast. Shortly after his return, he called a Politburo meeting partly to ratify his coastal initiative.

The Politburo's endorsement of his scheme was less fulsome than Zhao's earlier comments, as were remarks by some other senior leaders. Within a few more weeks, the Central Committee met and endorsed the coastal strategy, but warned that the interests of the interior must be protected, a theme later echoed by Zhao and other top leaders. Further warnings were sounded at the March-April NPC. Although it is not clear that minority leaders were directly involved in the subtle adjustment of policy, their regions will be among the chief beneficiaries of greater sensitivity to the impact of the coastal strategy on the interior.

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(C) Case Study: China's Muslims - Ethnic, Not Religious, Tensions

Despite the worldwide resurgence of militant fundamentalism, Beijing has little reason to worry that Chinese Muslims will follow in the path of Ayatollah Khomeini. Almost half of China's Muslims are Chinese-speaking Hui--either pure Han Muslims or descendants of the intermixture of Han with Arabic peoples--whose religious beliefs are tolerated by the regime and who pose no threat to it.

The other half of China's Muslims, however, are genuine ethnic minorities who inhabit sensitive border areas. Ethnic--rather than religious--tensions periodically break out and remain a concern for Beijing. Past experience with counter-productive policies of repression, and the desire to maintain and improve relations with the Arab world, suggests that Beijing will continue its liberal policies toward Chinese Muslims, both Hui and Turkic minorities in the Far West.

Chinese Muslims. China's 16 million Muslims are composed of two groups: roughly 7.6 million mostly ethnically Chinese Hui and about 8.4 million mostly ethnic minorities found along the borders with Mongolia and the Soviet Union. In the 1960s, resentment over Maoist efforts to extirpate religion and traditional culture often led to violent unrest within these groups.

Since the death of Mao, a number of disturbances have occurred in Xinjiang and elsewhere, but they have been more related to Han discrimination against ethnic minorities and the tensions arising from immigration of Han Chinese into minority regions than to religious conflict. In 1985, for example, Uygur students in Xinjiang, Beijing, and Shanghai demonstrated against the transfer of prisoners to labor camps in Xinjiang, the conduct of nuclear testing in the region, and the reassignment of a popular local leader.

Under Deng, mosques have been reopened, training of imams resumed, and international exchanges--including pilgrimages to Mecca--expanded. Virtually all Chinese Muslims are Sunni, and there is no apparent inter-sect rivalry. Islamic fundamentalism appears to have made few inroads in China, and contacts with outside religious groups are strictly controlled. Moreover, as minorities, most Chinese Muslims are exempt from such sensitive policies as the "one-child-per-couple" family planning program. In addition, Islamic beliefs and practices--unlike those of some religious groups in China--seldom conflict with the citizen's role in society.

Expanded foreign contacts. Beijing resumed granting permission to make the hajj in 1979; each year, some 2,000 Chinese

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Muslims travel to Mecca. Chinese Muslims maintain fairly extensive contacts with a wide variety of Islamic countries--including Iran, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia--but such contacts are carefully scrutinized and circumscribed by Beijing. Religious students are permitted to train in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but not in Iran, although each year China sends a delegation to Iran for the anniversary celebration of the overthrow of the Shah.

The search for influence and petrodollars. China's desire to play an expanded role in world politics--including the Persian Gulf and the Middle East--is one factor behind Beijing's relatively liberal treatment of Chinese Muslims. The leadership undoubtedly hopes to parlay religious contacts--such as hosting an international convention of the Muslim World League in December 1987--into greater influence, and eventually into diplomatic recognition by Saudi Arabia and other states that retain links to Taiwan.

Equally important to Beijing is the lure of Middle Eastern investment and expanded trade opportunities. In 1985 alone, the Ningxia Hui (Muslim) Autonomous Region, one of China's poorest provinces, attracted more than \$50 million in investment capital from Islamic countries. China also exports labor--mostly construction teams--to Iraq, Yemen, and other Middle Eastern countries. There is no evidence that Chinese Muslims have been involved in facilitating China's lucrative arms trade with the Middle East. But Beijing may hope to attract petroleum exploration and drilling technology from Saudi Arabia and other countries whose Muslim experts could feel somewhat at home in the predominantly Muslim areas of west China, where the PRC's most promising on-land oil reserves are likely to be found.

(C) Case Study: Tibetans - Why Their Case Is Different

The series of violent clashes since October 1987 between Chinese authorities and ethnic Tibetans demanding greater religious and political freedom highlights the uniqueness of the Tibetan issue in China's policy toward minorities. This uniqueness has several aspects:

--Geostrategic importance. The Tibetans inhabit one of the most remote and inaccessible border areas of the PRC. Renewed tensions along the disputed eastern sector of the Sino-Indian border in 1986-87 resulted in the return to Tibet of PLA troops that had been withdrawn as part of China's military streamlining. The ~~Palestine~~ Liberation Army Organization, in meeting its perceived security requirements and demonstrating resolve in its dispute with India, reexacerbated tensions with ethnic Tibetans, who viewed the return of troops as a possible portent of a rollback

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of the more liberal policies which had been enacted in the region.

--Religion. Unlike China's Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists find some of their religious beliefs in conflict with the state. Han officials, for example, view the retreat of a large percentage of the male population to monasteries as an economic liability: Monastics are, in the official view, consumers but not producers. Chinese officials believe that Tibet cannot afford such a "luxury," and resent the resulting extra burden on the central government budget. Similarly, Chinese officials resent the "wasteful" expenditure of scarce resources on the construction of numerous monasteries and shrines, religious observances, and articles of devotion.

--Tirredentism. Historically, "Tibet" was a loose amalgamation of local satrapies and monastery-ruled feudatories that proclaimed religious allegiance to the Dalai Lama's government in Lhasa but maintained virtual political independence. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Chinese incorporated large areas of the historical and ethnolinguistic greater Tibetan region into surrounding provinces. Many Tibetans want a restoration of "greater Tibet" as a political unit.

--Government-in-exile. Probably the most important difference between Tibet and other minority areas of China is the existence of a rival government abroad. The unique historical position of the office of Dalai Lama and the respect and religious adoration with which the Dalai Lama is viewed by religious Tibetans bolster Tibetan yearnings for a return of the Dalai and provide a potential--if unrealistic--alternative to Chinese rule.

--International support. The mystique of Tibet has long attracted Western interest. US support for anticommunist insurgents in Tibet through the early 1970s, the international prestige of the current Dalai, and the interest of the human rights community have raised the visibility of the Tibet issue in a way that no other ethnic minority in China has enjoyed.

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China's Ethnic Minorities  
With Population Exceeding 1 Million, 1987

Total Population	1,071,165,200
All Minorities	65,926,800
Zhuang	16,154,200
Manchu	9,150,300*
Miao	7,661,600
Hui	7,600,100
Uygur	6,611,200
Yi	6,607,500
Mongol	5,202,600
Tibetan	4,738,300
Tujia	4,402,400
Dong	2,388,100
Yao	2,112,600
Bouyei	1,645,600
Korean	1,308,700
Bai	1,186,100
Hani	1,073,100

Source: Figures are from the July 1, 1987, 1-percent census sample conducted by the PRC's State Statistical Bureau.

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\* The number of Manchus in the 1982 census was slightly more than 4.3 million, suggesting that the Manchu population had more than doubled in five years. The discrepancy between 1982 and 1987 figures is far beyond the likely statistical error of the 1987 1-percent sample. Reports from China suggest that many people are now declaring themselves members of ethnic minorities in order to enjoy the current benefits of membership in a minority, after decades of "passing" as Han Chinese. Such self-selection is likely to be easiest and most persuasive in the minority groups most difficult to distinguish from the Han majority, including Manchus.